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Statement by

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East Timorese Refugees Commission
(Portugal)

before the

House Subcommittee on Foreign Operations
of the
Committee on Appropriations

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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Sub-Committee, may I begin by expressing my profound appreciation to you for conducting this hearing on East Timor. My country may seem small and remote from the perspective of Capitol Hill but the tragedy which has befallen my people is totally out of proportion with this seeming insignificance. I might add that the slight attention given to East Timor is also totally out of proportion to the massive international response given to Kampuchea and Afghanistan despite the striking similarity between these situations and that of East Timor. I see this hearing as one important way of redressing the balance in favour of my country, so neglected, so abused and so ignored.

I am Father Francisco Fernandes, a Roman Catholic Priest from East Timor and Honorary President of the East Timorese Refugee Commission in Portugal. I now live in Western Australia where I am the chaplain to the Portuguese and Timorese Community.

I am not here to promote the cause of any political party. I appear before you as a catholic priest bound by the highest obligations of the Gospel and my priesthood to speak out for justice and truth on behalf of my people who are denied this right and condemned to silence.

I believe my experience of Indonesian oppression in West Timor and in East Timor in 1975 and 1976 and my years in exile in the refugee camps of Portugal have equipped me well to understand the present situation of my people.

Many communications from inside Timor (usually in the form of smuggled letters, some of them carried by sympathetic Indonesians) reach me and my fellow Timorese overseas telling of the situation there now.

These communications are recent, detailed, and highly credible. They speak of profound unhappiness and deep-seated discontent and alienation. The incredible figure of 300,000 dead and missing is often quoted. Some 300,000 tribal people who have survived are confined to re-settlement sites which represent a radical and deeply traumatic change from their traditional pattern of settlement and life-style. Overseas aid may fill their bellies but it has not warmed their hearts. The little development which has occurred has been cosmetic, as in material improvements in Dili, and unaccompanied by moral, political or economic change. The most basic human rights continue to be ignored and abused. Indonesian military efforts to eliminate resistance accompany purges against civilians suspected of dissident activities.

Is it any wonder, then, that my people reject integration totally and continue passionately to aspire to independence?

The Biafra-like famine which afflicts my people and which the United States Government is attempting to alleviate with its aid, is the gravest possible indictment of the Indonesian Government. It is not surprising, then, that Indonesia and its apologists should attempt to conceal its crime by blaming the situation on other factors.

One should not make the mistake of accepting the State Department's explanation of human tragedy in East Timor. The vast majority of our people took refuge in the mountains after the Indonesian invasion because of the violence associated with it. They were not forced by Fretilin to flee as is often alleged. In a report to the Governor, for example, the District Administrator of Baucau bemoaned the fact that of the 30,000 people resident there at the end of 1976, only 9,000 remained, the rest

having been killed or having fled to the mountains. It should be added that to claim everybody fled or was taken to the mountains reveals a basic lack of understanding of Timorese demography.

Many people lived in the mountains as a matter of course, where they coped quite well economically. They emerged from the mountains only two or more years after the Indonesian military activities had made life intolerable for them there. But for many, the worst conditions developed only after they had surrendered. Indonesia, far from treating them with the care and concern often described by their representatives and American emissaries, left tens of thousands in so-called resettlement camps, without food or medical care despite requests from international aid agencies to be allowed into the territory. At the same time, aid channeled through the Indonesian Red Cross was misappropriated. Thousands died who could have been saved. This happened fully one year before the first major international relief effort was undertaken. The State Department claim, therefore, that Fretilin or the 1975 civil war or natural factors were responsible for the Biafra-like situation which the International Red Cross found in East Timor in 1979, is plain nonsense and a transparent cover-up.

I would like now to make some comments about particular aspects of the general situation in East Timor today.

First, regarding aid, I am concerned that only two international aid agencies have been admitted into East Timor. The situation requires the expertise and services of all available agencies. Both the International Red Cross and the Catholic Relief Services have said there are tremendous un-met needs and no danger of duplication were other agencies to come. Yet the reality is that a number of agencies who have funds especially set aside

for East Timor have been refused access by the Indonesian Government. Why is the Indonesian Government excluding aid agencies if it has the best interests of the Timorese at heart?

I am also concerned that only two or three foreign personnel have been allowed to work in East Timor with the existing aid program. In recent United Nations debates, a central issue raised by the United States and other Western Governments has been the lack of sufficient monitoring of aid channeled to the Phnom Penh Government in Kampuchea. Still, there are 60 international relief workers based in that city. Past experience and continued allegations of the corruption of aid in East Timor make it imperative that there be marked improvement in the monitoring of the millions of American dollars going to Timor through Indonesian channels.

Additional foreign personnel are also needed to advise the people on improved agricultural methods. The aim of aid must be to restore self-reliance and not to keep people dependent on hand-outs. I am disturbed that there seems to be no movement in this direction. Uatolari, for example, on the south coast, is one of the worst-hit centers. 15,000 people there will depend on the International Red Cross for food and medicine until October. Two crucial questions arise. Why is this sort of assistance needed in this place when it is well known that this district was one of the economic success stories of East Timor in better days when it was known as the rice granary of Timor? What will happen after the International Red Cross leaves in October if no provision is made for self-reliance now?

This leads me to comment on the 150 'resettlement sites' which are the focus of the Catholic Relief Services program.

The people are concentrated in these centers and farming is permitted only in their near vicinity. The effect of these two factors has been to disrupt traditional patterns of production and self-reliance and to leave unexploited large tracts of fertile land. In others words, to confine the people to these centers is to condemn them to dependency on aid hand-outs. What is required is freedom to return to their villages and plots where they can resume their familiar agricultural practices. Aid should be supplied to support them in that endeavour and to develop it with appropriate technology. Instead, it appears these sites are to be permanent. The people know this and recognize that these sites represent the first stages of a total re-structuring of their way of life. They do not want this and are therefore unhappy about accepting aid on these terms which have been forced on them. I think the Catholic Relief Services needs to question whether their maintenance of these structures is really in the best interests of the Timorese.

I know too that the Timorese are concerned that their former holdings could be expropriated by other Timorese or Indonesians. They have received with alarm reports that East Timor will soon be the target of a transmigration exercise involving the settlement of Indonesian peasants from other islands. Where, they ask with anxiety, will they be settled?

Aid should cover all humanitarian needs. It should not be restricted to physical needs alone. Unfortunately, this is the case with the International Red Cross program, which is severely limited in its range.

Indonesia has not allowed the International Red Cross to carry out the full range of its traditional tasks although all the evidence is that these services are desperately required in East Timor.

Let me list these needs:

(1) There is hardly one Timorese family in Australia or Portugal which does not have a relative or friend missing in East Timor. I have with me now a list of names of missing Timorese and you are welcome to see it. It is far from exhaustive. The point I want to make is that no one is trying to trace these people or establish whether they are dead or alive—a source of terrible anguish to their relatives.

(2) Executions without trials continue to occur in Timor. For example, Joao Ernestino de Andrade Sarmiento, who surrendered in 1978, was executed in 1979 near Los Palos allegedly for former Fretilin activities but most likely because he blocked the access of Indonesian troops to his two teenage daughters. I have other examples and I am sure they are only the tip of the iceberg.

(3) Political prisoners are likewise being denied the protection of the International Red Cross. The Red Cross has raised these matters with the Indonesian authorities but was warned off it in no uncertain terms.

(4) Another glaring abuse of human rights is the continued enforced separation of Timorese families. The Indonesian Government has agreed to allow 625 people to leave Timor for reunion with their wives and children and immediate families in Australia. But two years after the agreement was made, and five years after the separation occurred, less than half of these people have been allowed to leave East Timor. The following

Timorese do not see it exclusively in these terms or think that more aid is the fundamental answer to our problems. Our experience under Indonesia has convinced us that the key to our dignity and happiness lies in the exercise of our God-given right to self-determination. Much deeper than the pain in our bellies or the disease in our bodies is the pain in our spirits that comes from the denial of our rights. We yearn only for our freedom, our freedom to live without fear, our freedom to speak our own language, our freedom to make our own decisions, and our freedom to enter the community of nations. The United States, which is big and powerful, has declared itself the champion of the human rights of the small and the oppressed. It is basically this declaration of your Government's commitment which has brought me in hope before this forum today.